

Popular Religious Movements and Heterodox Sects in Chinese History,

by Hubert Seiwert (in collaboration with Ma Xisha)

Leiden: Brill, 2003, 548 pp.

Book review by David A. Palmer

PRE-PUBLICATION VERSION

Published in *Etudes chinoises*, vol. XXIII (2004), pp. 482-491.

Interest in the history and sociology of Chinese sectarian religion has greatly increased in the past years. The Falun Gong phenomenon has underscored the vitality of Chinese sectarianism and its far-reaching impact in politics and society; and has shown how ancient historical scenarios pitting the state against sectarian movements can play themselves out at the turn of the 21st century. Long ignored by scholars of Chinese religion and presenting particular difficulties for academic study, sectarianism is a vast but still poorly understood province of the Chinese religious landscape. Seiwert's book thus comes at a most opportune moment, offering for the first time in a European language a comprehensive survey of sectarian movements in Chinese religious history, from the Han to the late Qing dynasties. Drawing on primary textual sources and on previous scholarship by Western and Chinese scholars (notably Barend ter Haar, Ma Xisha and Han Bingfang), Seiwert attempts to reconstruct the history of the Chinese sectarian tradition, with a focus on how the boundaries of its social milieu have been delimited during different historical periods in relation to changing definitions of orthodoxy and heterodoxy.

Chapters One ("Prophecies and Messianism in Han Confucianism") and Two ("Early Daoist Tradition") describe what appears to be a "sectarian milieu" during the Han, which influenced the emerging Confucian orthodoxy, and which was also the matrix of orthodox Daoism. This milieu was characterized by the periodic emergence of charismatic leaders claiming to have received revealed divine scriptures; apocalyptic, messianic, and millennial prophecies which could be interpreted as this-worldly (with political ramifications) or other-worldly; notions of salvation through the confession of sins and adherence to sectarian beliefs and practices; a sharp distinction between the followers of the Dao ("seed people") and those who continued to follow the evil ways of the world; as well as healing practices, body technologies, charm water, amulets, etc. By

comparing various sectarian leaders, groups, and scriptures from the Han period, the author demonstrates the existence of a fluid, dispersed sectarian milieu within which these common elements circulated and were transmitted, the sects known to history probably being only the visible tip of the iceberg. Contrary to Daoist historiography, he argues that the Heavenly Masters tradition founded by Zhang Daoling, typically considered to be the first organized Daoist church, was but one of a multitude of heterodox sectarian movements which flourished at the time.

Seiwert attempts to demonstrate how orthodox Confucianism and Daoism emerged from the eschatological/sectarian milieu. Certain sects and sectarian leaders grew in size and influence, posing a potential threat to political authority. The Yellow Turbans rebellion of Zhang Jiao, and Sun En's rebellion of 399, both of which mobilized sectarian followings, contributed to a lasting view of popular religious movements as dangers to the social and political order, which could precipitate the fall of dynasties. Against such a backdrop, some reformers, seeking legitimacy vis-à-vis the state or even to provide religious legitimation for the state, sought to purify religious tradition of elements that could be perceived as threatening or unpalatable to members of the elite. Thus eschatological, messianic, and prophetic elements (the *chenwei*) were removed from Confucian orthodoxy. In the case of Daoism, such as in Kou Qianzhi's reform, various strands of tradition were systematized and made into a coherent whole comparable to Buddhism, while at the same time excluding certain elements. Thus, a process of drawing a boundary between the orthodox and the heterodox began; a boundary which, from the beginning, involved conforming to the norms and standards of the state and its elite.

Chapter three, "Medieval Buddhism", describes the adoption of Buddhist elements by the sectarian milieu. Alongside the institutionalized Buddhism which strove for recognition and political legitimacy, elements of Buddhist teachings, symbolism and practice were deeply diffused into popular religion and combined with indigenous elements. In the sectarian sphere, this was notably expressed through the recasting of the classical Buddhist cosmology of kalpas and Maitreya into an eschatological structure derived from the Daoist tradition, with its prophecies of an imminent apocalypse, the arrival of a messianic figure (now conceived of as Maitreya or the King of Light), and a sharp distinction between the believers who will be saved, and the rest. Maitreya sects flourished throughout medieval China, and were occasionally involved in rebellions, such as that of Faqing, in 515, which reminded state officials of the Yellow Turban precedent. At a time of heated polemics between Buddhism and Daoism, in which each accused the

other of heterodoxy, institutional Buddhism attempted to draw a clear line between itself and the heterodox sects which used Buddhist language, symbols, and apocryphal texts. Seiwert argues that, given that the Buddhist doctrine of skilful means led to Buddhism's traditional openness to a great diversity of mutually contradictory teachings, the definition of Buddhist orthodoxy and heterodoxy in the Chinese context had little to do with religious doctrines per se, but was a reflection of political imperatives, as the state, and Buddhist institutions which sought its recognition and protection, attempted to eliminate potentially dangerous or subversive sects. Seiwert also criticizes attempts to classify of popular sects as "Buddhist" or "Daoist", arguing instead for an autonomous sectarian milieu in constant interaction with the orthodox Three Teachings and with folk religion. Within the sectarian milieu, groups could emerge which had a stronger Buddhist or Daoist coloration, or various intermediate combinations.

The Song and Yuan dynasties (chapter Four) saw the emergence of lay Buddhist societies, the best known of which are the White Cloud and White Lotus movements. These groups, often led by monks, were initially closely associated with orthodox Buddhist institutions and enjoyed a high reputation for their meritorious deeds. But, since they gave a more empowering role to lay believers, and were not covered by regulations restricting the expansion of monastic Buddhism, they expanded rapidly and competed with Buddhist institutions for followers and resources. They also diversified, with some groups moving far from orthodox forms. The boundary between White Cloud and White Lotus groups and other popular sects blurred, prompting criticism from orthodox Buddhist quarters, which was followed by an official ban on White Lotus societies in 1322. From then on the term "White Lotus" was stigmatized as equivalent to the older variety of Maitreyist and apocalyptic sects. Under the effect of such bans, orthodox lay Buddhism continued, but without using the White Lotus name, while other groups merged with the outlawed sectarian milieu, which had also absorbed elements of Manichaeism during this period. However, the oft-discussed sectarian background to the rebellions that toppled the Yuan dynasty had more Maitreyan millennialist motifs than White Lotus ones.

During the first half of the Ming dynasty, heterodox sects were banned. But state control over religious groups seems to have loosened by the 16th century, which saw the emergence of a wave of sectarian movements. The most significant innovation of these groups was their widespread production and distribution of sectarian scriptures. Earlier sects had scriptures too, but they were anonymous and not as widely circulated. Now a

whole genre of religious literature, the *baojuan*, became popular among the literati, indicating that the religious groups producing them were initially not perceived as heterodox. The scriptures allowed sects to disseminate their teachings to a broader audience and for a longer period of time. The paradigmatic case of the new type of popular religion was the numerous sects that traced their ancestry to Luo Menghong, author of the *Five Books in Six Volumes*. Seiwert describes the history of the Luo teachings in Chapter Five, stressing how, after the Patriarch's death, his teachings, which claimed to offer the only path to Buddhist enlightenment, were understood and practiced quite differently in different social milieus: some saw them as an expression of orthodox Chan Buddhism, others as compatible with Confucianism, while the boatmen of the Grand Canal worshiped Patriarch Luo in temples that also served as mutual help societies. In literati circles, there were attempts to legitimize Luo's writings as orthodox, while among the downtrodden, a heterodox status could easily be accepted, and even become a source of positive identification, as the teachings drew a sharp line between the believers and outsiders. Over time, many Luo-inspired sects adopted elements of Maitreya messianism and the eschatology of the kalpas, merging the Luo teachings into the sectarian milieu. Seiwert compares the proliferation of Luo sects to a bush, whose root is easy to identify, but from which it is difficult to clearly distinguish the numerous, tangled branches.

The religious groups derived from the Luo teachings are but the best-known of the wide range of popular sects that flourished in the Ming and Qing dynasties. Chapter six, "The Spectrum of Popular Religious Teachings in Late Ming", describes some *baojuan* that predated Luo's scriptures, and discusses some common themes in the sectarian literature of the period, such as the Unborn Mother. Three sectarian movements are also analysed in some detail: the Yellow Heaven Teaching (*Huangtian jiao*), the Vast Yang Teaching (*Hongyang jiao*), and the Three-in-One Teaching (*Sanyi jiao*). In their early stages, the former two were more Daoist in coloration while the latter was more Confucian in orientation. But with the passage of time, various branches of these sects gravitated in different directions and made different combinations within the symbolic field of Chinese religion, as delimited by the four poles of Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, and popular religion.

In the next chapter, "Homogenization and Diversification of Sectarian Traditions", Seiwert elaborates on the concept of the "sectarian milieu" as a field within which a broad and ever-expanding pool of religious symbols circulated, leading to a certain homogeneity among sects, but which were combined in different ways and with

different points of emphasis, leading to the differentiation of sects. The circulation of ideas within the sectarian milieu followed social networks which linked and encompassed individual sects on the one hand, but were, to a certain degree, differentiated from other social milieus. To illustrate his point about the existence of a broader sectarian milieu, Seiwert discusses the *Longhua jing*, a *baojuan* considered to be one of the most representative of sectarian writings. By analyzing the content and references contained in this scripture, and comparing it with other scriptures, Seiwert demonstrates the mutual borrowings and references between scriptures, as sectarian writers drew from a common pool of religious symbols and literature, and often deliberately attempted to synthesize past traditions while differentiating themselves from competing sects. He also argues that the life of a scripture could outlast the lifespan of individual sects and influence different sects that were otherwise not necessarily connected. Seiwert describes the sects associated with the *Longhua jing*, including Wang Sen's *Dacheng jiao*, which was implicated in the Xu Hongru rebellion near the end of the Ming dynasty; Gong Chang's *Yuandun jiao*; and their various offshoots. He then discusses the proliferation of sectarian networks under the Qing and the effect of state repression campaigns on their diffusion and organization, through studies of the Jizushan sect of Zhang Baotai, the Bagua sectarian network, and *Yiguandao*, the largest of the Ming/Qing sectarian traditions to survive today.

Chapter Eight, "The Dynamics of Religious Movements During the Qing and Ming Dynasties", attempts to analyse Chinese sectarianism from a broad sociological perspective, inspired by Stark and Bainbridge's theory of the sociology of religion. First, Seiwert tries to identify to what extent the religious movements that proliferated in the latter half of the Ming dynasty represented a new development in China's religious history. His study shows that a sectarian milieu existed in China since the Han, and that many elements of Ming sectarian teachings, such as Maitreyanism, had their origins in earlier periods. The most original teachings are the idea of man's fall into sin and his return to the Unborn Mother, which have no equivalent in Buddhism, Daoism, or previous traditions. But individual elements of this complex can be linked to a longer history, such as the cult of Xiwangmu dating to the Han. In the realm of religious ideas, then, Seiwert concludes that the Ming sects did not produce any major innovations. Sociologically, however, the widespread production and dissemination of *baojuan* texts marked a significant change from the past, permitting the wider dissemination of sectarian teachings, especially among the literate middle classes. This phenomenon had a

strong impact on the dynamics of the sectarian milieu, which Seiwert then turns to analyse. He begins by looking at how sects emerge, proposing a typology of three “ideal types” of sectarian founders: the revelation type, the entrepreneur type, and the schismatic type. He then considers their dynamics of development, in which a key factor is the sect’s level of social deviance, or, most importantly, its degree of orthodoxy, here defined exclusively in terms of the sect’s relationship to the political authorities. The internal changes of sects, and the shifting degrees of state repression – light in the 16th century, but heavy in the 18th – were both factors in the evolution of sects toward or away from orthodoxy. The expansion of sects into different social milieus led to concurrent processes of diversification and homogenization: the teachings and practices of a particular sect would change as they adapted to different social milieus, leading to differentiation, but at the same time, there was a tendency for sects in the same social milieu to become part of a common pool of beliefs, expectations, and practices, leading to homogenization. Finally, Seiwert looks into the costs and rewards of adhesion to a sect. The rewards to be gained were both religious (salvation, liberation from sin) and mundane (health, community, economic). But the cost of joining a “heterodox” group, in terms of social stigma and danger of punishment, was high. This situation led to two different trends in sect development. Sects whose members were well-integrated in society had a tendency to attempt to reduce tension, and to evolve toward a more orthodox image. But those whose members were more marginal had less to lose, and were more receptive to the high religious rewards of millennialism and even violent rebellion. Therefore, according to Seiwert, Stark and Bainbridge’s theory of costs, rewards, and religious tension with society is not falsified by the case of Chinese sectarianism.

The final chapter, “Popular Religious Movements and Elite Culture”, attempts to situate sectarian movements in relation to the common dichotomy between popular and elite culture. Seiwert notes that, on the one hand, popular sects did, to a certain degree, penetrate China’s literate elite, as evidenced by the dissemination of scriptures, and were thus not limited to the “popular” lower classes; on the other hand, certain sectarian religious themes such as the Unborn mother and apocalypticism were absent or excluded from the elite discourses of Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism. He concludes that the distinction between popular and elite culture is not based on social structure, but on the distinction between cultural systems which are autonomous from the actual beliefs and values maintained by individuals. Confucianism, as a cultural system, is an order of

discourse containing procedures for the production, integration, and exclusion of knowledge – which does not mean that a Confucian scholar actually believes in every statement of Confucian discourse. By this standard, then, “popular” religion refers to those beliefs and practices that did not conform to the discursive rules of the elite culture, even if they were actually shared by many members of the elite. Among the beliefs that could never fit into the elite order of discourse was the idea that the present world is imperfect and corrupted, or that the world could be completely different. Such ideas are a common thread in the history of Chinese sectarianism, and by definition pose a challenge to the orthodox order.

Seiwert’s book lays a foundation for understanding the overall historical development of Chinese sectarianism. The notion of a “sectarian milieu” provides a useful tool for understanding the continuity of sectarian motifs and the general pattern of links between ephemeral sects. It also opens possibilities for fertile comparisons with what has been called the “cultic milieu” of heterodox esoteric and religious movements in the West. Seiwert also correctly establishes that the creation of boundaries between orthodoxy and heterodoxy is crucial for understanding the dynamics of the sectarian milieu, and that the key criterion for orthodoxy in China has always been political. At the same time, the book opens a range of new questions. As Seiwert points out, orthodoxy is always defined in relation to heterodoxy and vice-versa, and he attempts to show that orthodox Daoism and Buddhism have consciously constructed themselves in opposition to what were perceived as heterodox forms of religion. The implication of this is, firstly, that the history of sectarianism, of the orthodox religious institutions, and of the religious dimensions of the state cannot be fully understood without understanding the relations between them, and, secondly, given the role played by the sects as a foil against which the orthodox religions define themselves and against which the state elaborates its religious policy, the sectarian milieu may have played an even greater role in Chinese religious history than the number of its actual followers would suggest. Sectarian movements, often completely ignored in general scholarly accounts of Chinese religion, thus appear as central to the overall dynamics of the Chinese religious system.

Overall, *Popular Religious Movements* is not an easy read, and tends to drown the reader in detail. Although the overall structure of the book is chronological, there is also an attempt to analyse the material thematically in each chapter, sometimes jumping back and forth in time. This can be confusing at times. In spite of these minor difficulties,

however, Seiwert's book will be an indispensable reference for students of Chinese popular religion.

DAVID A. PALMER

Visiting Professor, EFEO Centre, Hong Kong

Research Fellow, London School of Economics and Political Science